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ABSTRACT

The stated objective of "The Norton Anthology of American Literature" (NAAL) is to present a thorough selection from the literary tradition along with new or lesser-known works to exemplify multi-cultural America. The first edition of the NAAL emphasized traditional pieces. Poetry selections in the second edition were greatly shortened. The second edition also added new writers and pieces and expanded existent writers' works. Changes to volume 1 of the third edition consisted only of additions and restorations (no deletions). Volume 2 saw its biggest changes in poetry. In all, the third edition added 23 "new voices." Some people have voiced their concern that anthologies like the NAAL are indulging in over-addition with not enough subtraction, resulting in no real challenge to the current canon. The idea of a "canon" of American Literature is primarily a twentieth-century concept, created and heavily revised in this century. Anthologies like the NAAL offer adaptability to the teacher and to the reader, attempting to reach a point of balance. With the NAAL, the changes have been generally useful, expanding the reading choices and presenting more variety, especially in contemporary literature. (RS)

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"The Art is in the Balancing":
Canon Expansion in THE NORTON
ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

In a recent letter, Norton editor Julia A. Reidhead describes changes made to the third edition of THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN LITERATURE: "We've worked to balance increased representation of several traditions -- notably works by women , African Americans, and Native Americans -- with ample works from the traditional canon. As you know from teaching, the art is in the balancing. The NAAL has won its followers on that basis." Thus, Norton's stated objective is to present a thorough selection from the literary tradition with new or lesser-known works to exemplify multi-cultural America. This ideal balancing of the older and the newer, the traditional and the emergent, represents a lofty goal, but is this attainable, and how is it accomplished?

The first edition of the NAAL went long on traditional pieces; for example, E. E. Cummings was represented by thirty-five poems, nineteen of

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which were cut in the second edition. The Cummings deletion typifies the changes that were made from the first to second editions; poetry selections were greatly shortened. Carl Sandburg and Ezra Pound each lost eight poems; Marianne Moore lost ten of twenty-two pieces. Other deletions from the first edition included some mild surprises: Frank Norris, Nathaniel West, Mary McCarthy, Susan Sontag, Robert Creeley, and Malcolm X were all dropped entirely. Yet, the second edition also added new writers and pieces and expanded existent writers' works; for example, Anne Bradstreet picked up four new poems and a letter, and John Smith, Michael Wigglesworth, and Samuel Sewall were among some of those added to Volume I.

Curiously, nothing was deleted from Volume I in the third edition; the editors only chose to make additions and restorations. This fact is most likely a result of the belief that the pre-twentieth-century materials are part of a more stable canon; that is, there is a consensus that these writers "belong" to the tradition. Among their expansions, the editors added chapters to William Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation," more poems to Bradstreet, another sermon to Jonathan Edwards, letters from Benjamin Franklin, a story by Poe, and an essay by Thoreau.

Some authors were new to the third edition's Volume I; Robert Beverley's "The History and Present State of Virginia" appears, as do the following: Elizabeth Ashbridge's conversion and persecution narrative, letters between John and Abigail Adams, a slave narrative by Olaudah Equiano, and Royall Tyler's "The Contrast." Except for Equiano, most of these writers would be considered fairly "traditional," even though some are not male.

However, the restorations were what I found most interesting about the third edition of Volumes I and II. The second edition had deleted a number of writers and pieces, which the third edition reinstated. The editors restored "Fate" by Emerson, calling it "a central later essay," and Poe's "The Poetic Principle," pronouncing it an "important critical essay." Two Hawthorne stories, "Roger Malvin's Burial" and "Wakefield," were restored to the third edition, as were Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Foreigner" and Mary Wilkins Freeman's "The Revolt of Mother." Three writers who had been deleted from the second edition reappeared in the third: Frank Norris, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley.

Volume II saw its biggest changes in the genre of poetry; the editors made many selection changes, in titles throughout and in recent poets, especially. Again, restorations are evident from first to second edition deletions. The most sweeping overhaul came in the "Poets Since 1975" section; six poets were dropped completely, and six new ones took their places. Other earlier poets saw exchanges in selections; Robert Penn Warren's poems were entirely changed, with the exception of the portions of "Audubon." Robert Lowell lost thirteen poems but picked up five new ones, and Adrienne Rich's selections were expanded with the second edition but then inexplicably shortened with the third.

Volume II kept its "traditional" plays, "Long Day's Journey Into Night," "A Streetcar Named Desire," and "Death of a Salesman," and added two recent examples, Sam Shepard's "True West" and Adrienne Kennedy's "A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White." In all, the third edition added twenty-three "new voices": two playwrights, twelve poets, and nine fiction writers, including many well-known writers, like Joyce Carol Oates, as well as some lesser-known ones, like Leslie Marmon Silko

The NAAL presents fifty female writers, sixteen of whom are new with the third edition. These women include traditional choices like Emily Dickinson and newly anthologized writers like Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, Louise Bogan, and Cathy Song. The NAAL also represents African-American writers with twenty-one authors, five of whom are new to the third edition. These examples vary from Equiano's slave narrative to the twentieth-century poetry of Robert Hayden. And, in keeping with its stated goals, the NAAL has incorporated nine authors who represent Native-American, Asian-American, and Chicano traditions, including writers like Louise Erdrich and Denise Chavez.

With all these changes taken into consideration, some have voiced their concern that anthologies like the NAAL are indulging in over-addition with not enough subtraction, resulting in no real challenge to the current canon. How we view this -- as a problem or as an advantage -- depends upon whether we see canon-shaping as a process of exclusion or one of inclusion. Further, is the canon solely an extension of the classroom? Are we including works that challenge us -- or just ones we've been taught,

and thus excluding worthy pieces and writers? And how do we judge? This dilemma of "excellence," of literary criteria and readers' desires, this question of power and politics has long been a source of controversy in the academic community, and the canon is not weakened by the continuous state of flux, but is stimulated by it. In a recent issue of PMLA, Wendell Harris argues that "given the forces generating the professional recirculation of texts, we risk intellectual stagnation if we do not champion new selections based on new criteria" (118). Further, in his 1988 essay in CRITICAL INQUIRY, Hazard Adams notes that, ultimately, "everyone is his own canon-maker" (760).

The idea of a "canon" of American literature is primarily a twentieth-century concept -- created and heavily revised in this century. Our efforts to enlarge and to continue the canon are not apocalyptic; we are not intending either to overthrow the existing structure or to "close" it. In preserving what is valued -- what is being taught and discussed -- we both confirm the canon and reconsider it, and this is a healthy process. Certainly, the new anthologies like the NAAL offer adaptability to the teacher and to the reader, attempting to reach a point of balance.

It is true that we should not become too comfortable or complacent with a text or a particular list of selections, but there should be some pieces on which we can depend. A good anthology will offer a mixture of conventional "masterworks" -- the traditional curriculum -- with lesser-known "fresh voices," thereby supplying the student with the basic background knowledge in the core of established writers, while also addressing the needs and interests of the contemporary reader and reflecting the multi-ethnic classroom.

It is fashionable to see recent "canoneering" as a conspiracy to overthrow a perfect system of great works, but this is not the case. With the NAAL, the changes have been generally useful, expanding the reading choices and presenting more variety, especially in the contemporary literature section. Seventy years ago, T. S. Eliot addressed this issue succinctly: He said the new writer must be aware that he

> must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past.... judged, not amputated, by them; not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the canons of dead critics. It is a judgment, a

comparison, in which two things are measured by each other. To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art. And we do not quite say that the new is more valuable because it fits in; but its fitting in is a test of its value -- a test, it is true, which can only be slowly and cautiously applied, for we are none of us infallible judges....(785).

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